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Building A High School Instrumental Program From Scratch

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TEACHING/TECHNOLOGY



NEWS!

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Whether you are a new teacher, veteran teacher in a new school or someone trying to build and maintain a school instrumental music program, there are two challenges you will face. Those two challenges are recruiting students and retaining students from semester to semester or year to year. Both of these challenges will impact on the longtime success of your program.

Recruiting New Students



When I was in the process of building programs through recruiting new students there were two groups I targeted. The first group was the group of students who had prior music in middle school who were coming into my school but had not signed up for band or orchestra. The second group was made up of students in the school who had taken music in my new school prior to my arrival but had opted to “wait and see” how the new guy worked out. In order to identify these kids, I spent hours combing through the incoming class’s personal records to see if they had prior instrumental experience. I then contacted each of these students via mail or phone to ask them to join my program. I let the counselors know how important it was for me to identify these students and enlisted their assistance in getting these kids scheduled. I even got my principal to approve scheduling honors classes in such a way my kids didn’t have to decide between my class and an honors class. My relationship with the guidance staff was crucial. One of my friends who has a very successful program in the state actually sits down with the assistant principal in charge of scheduling to make sure she gets and keeps her kids.

This may seem like a lot of work but the long term success of your program depends on you getting these students and them buying into you. If you don’t possess good interpersonal skills, work on them. At this point, there is no separation of the program and you, both are unknown commodities. What I learned was that the personal contact made the kids feel wanted and it served to give them at least one person at the high school they felt they knew. Remember, coming into high school is a challenge for the kids and their parents and both want to know that someone cares about their adjustment. Band and orchestra offer a ready-made group that these kids have something in common with so their adjustment to high school is calmed somewhat.

When I had marching band and jazz band camps in the summer prior to school being open, these kids got to learn their way around the school and make friends with upperclassmen, an important point I constantly mentioned. Everyone wants to act as if hazing doesn’t go on in

schools but it does. Kids who are in band or orchestra are generally the only ones who take classes with upperclassmen. Upperclassmen generally look out for their underclassmen friends who are in an activity with them.

One of my most successful tools of recruiting was with hand made signs. The ones you can buy are good but when you and a group of students take out time to make them two things happen. First, you and those students bond through a team building activity, and secondly, the students who see the signs are more apt to read them. My best slogan was that band was the only team that never loses. I would continue to build on the team concept and let the students know that recruiting was not just my responsibility though I took the lead.

Winning Over Upperclassmen

The biggest challenge I faced when changing schools was to compete with the "ghost of the former director". No matter how good or bad your predecessor was, he or she reaches god-like status once you get there. There will be a loyal group of upperclassmen who will want to hold on to the school's tradition. This is very tricky. If you don't communicate the point that you respect them and their traditions and that you only wish to build on the good traditions and start some new ones, they will fight your every move. I always made the point that since I didn't know how my predecessor did things I felt more comfortable trying things my way and needed their help. Establish your standards and stick to them. Your first goal should be to strive for performance excellence and everything you do should work towards that goal. It's very important that your upperclassmen know that you value their input. Remember, they will be talking about you in places that you don't have access. One of the reasons your recruiting will fail is that if it is being countered by negative comments by the "cool" kids. There's a reason your upperclassmen stayed in the program—they enjoy band or orchestra. Capitalize on that interest and you will be successful.

Get Back Those Who Left The Program

One of the things that have been studied is whether or not, once the continuity in music instruction is broken, those will kids return. The unfortunate fact is that even if students stay out for only one semester, chances are they will be lost. That makes it very important that you identify these students immediately. I contacted these students personally and would have a pizza party for them to get to know me. I encouraged my current students to bring someone they knew who had been in band or orchestra to the pizza party. We didn't talk about why they weren't in the program, we focused on what they'd be missing by not participating in the program. As I talked to young directors about what I did they would sometimes act as if these actions were beneath them. They had something to offer and these kids should know it. In a perfect world that would be true but anyone who has spent a day in a high school knows that

high school is not a perfect world. High school is based on what's cool and what's not cool. My kids identified themselves as "Band Nerds". I thought that was negative but soon found out that was the way they created a niche for themselves.

Communicate With Parents And The Community

The most important part of successful recruiting is communication. I highlighted our achievements and outlined my vision for the program in a monthly newsletter. This newsletter became my best way of getting the word out about student's individual accomplishments and our group accomplishments. In my last few years our web page carried back issues of the newsletter.

The newsletters were distributed to the middle school feeders so that incoming students knew what we were trying to do. A lot of parents were glad to have this newsletter to share their child's accomplishments with neighbors and friends. The high school is still the center piece of most communities and so it's important that you project your program as an important part of your high school. I found out that a lot of my kids wrote for the school newspaper so I had them get the newspaper to start a special section to cover the fine arts, especially instrumental music.

Develop A Five Year Plan

I always developed a five year plan for my programs and after five years I would evaluate my progress. In my last school, my program started off small but good. My five year plan was to expand my string orchestra into a full orchestra and to be able to have a Wind Ensemble as my top band group. I used the phrase "FUN THROUGH EXCELLENCE" as our motto and drove home the point that no one has fun when they don't look and/or sound good. By the time I left that school I had a full orchestra of over 80 students, three bands totaling over 170 students including an audition only Wind Ensemble, an audition only jazz ensemble class, a full time and a part-time director assisting me. We were selected as a GRAMMY Signature School twice in five years (2002 and 2004), won numerous national awards for students, teachers and performing groups, and consistently placed a large number of students in county-wide and all state groups.

The greatest measure of our success was the number of siblings who signed up for classes. That meant that those kids had heard positive things about us from their older siblings and that they enjoyed the concerts they attended over the years.

All of this came as a result of my following the procedures listed above. The question you must answer is simple—are you building for long term success or are you a temporary solution to your school's staffing needs? Ron Kearns is a retired Montgomery County teacher, P. Mauriat Saxophone Performing Artist and a Vandoren Performing Artist.

For more information Please visit Vandoren Education at Dansr.com.

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